On a slide titled “A Snapshot of Homelessness in Grand County,” data from July of 2019 to June of 2021 showed that an average of 55 individuals were seeking homelessness services every month.

“That’s a big number,” said Rhiana Medina, director of the Moab Valley Multicultural Center and member of the Local Homeless Council, at a Jan. 18 Grand County Commission meeting.

“We know we have a well-documented housing crisis and we have an extremely low inventory of affordable housing,” Medina said, “so when someone is homeless, rehousing them is very difficult.”

One goal of the Local Homeless Council is requiring landlords give tenants more notice before mass evictions. Two large recent evictions – one a mobile home park and another of a property with multiple residences – gave renters a few short weeks to relocate and strained the capacity of local organizations to help, leaving people in unstable situations where alternative housing is in short supply.

“People are moving into unhealthy situations when they’re forcing them to rehouse too fast,” Medina said. “And it’s creating some really bad health outcomes...higher depression, anxiety, higher rates of suicide, increased utilization of the emergency room, lower rates of health insurance.”

“If you don’t have a place to live, how can you concentrate on your own health?” Medina asked.
Every winter, service organizations across the country conduct a survey to try to find out how many people are spending the night without a home on a certain date in January. Called the Point in Time count, the survey is one snapshot of information helping to illuminate the problem of homelessness and reaching people who need help the most.

In Grand County, nonprofits Moab Solutions and the Moab Valley Multicultural Center usually collaborate to conduct the count. Staff and volunteers check places around Moab and the county where they know that people are living, and ask them to participate by answering questions on an online form on a tablet or phone.

Moab is a small enough community that many of the people struggling with homelessness and advocates already know each other. Last year, 30 people were counted in the survey, which collected data for the night of Jan. 27, 2021. That was an increase over previous years. This year’s count will document the number of homeless on the night of Jan. 26.

Moab Solutions Director Sara Melnicoff has worked to help those needing emergency services for over a decade and knows where people usually go when they’re living outside.

However, the count also aims to include people who are living in places considered unfit or unsafe: a place without plumbing or running water, like a vehicle, shed or storage unit.

In that case, Melnicoff urged people to reach out and talk to advocates about their situation.

“If someone’s living in someone’s driveway, we’ll never find them unless they self-report,” she said.

People who report their housing situations help organizations get an accurate picture of the scope and nature of the housing crisis and homelessness in our area.

The survey also tallies people who are living in a temporary shelter, such as a motel room or a friend’s living room. While those locations may be habitable, they are temporary.

If you or someone you know is in a temporary shelter or a situation not meant for human habitation, contact Moab Solutions at 435-401-4685 to participate in the count.

Numbers from the Point in Time count help determine how much funding local advocacy groups receive from the federal government.
On the morning of Jan. 27, Melnicoff and others will interview people about where they spent the previous night, as well as collect data, if the participant is willing, on intersecting issues like medical conditions and substance abuse. Surveyors will continue to collect data about the night of Jan. 26 for the next several days.

Diego Velasquez is assistant to the executive director of Moab Solutions; he took the position this fall.

“I feel like I couldn’t have found a better way to begin that work than with Sara,” Velasquez said. “This is the most hands-on and immersive and experiential learning that I’ve had on a job.”

Velasquez will ensure that data from this year’s Grand County Point in Time count is properly submitted to state and federal authorities.

“This is the one time during the year where we can paint a picture for those outside our county about what homelessness looks like here,” said Velasquez in an email to the Moab Sun News.

**The challenge of transitional housing**

The Local Homeless Council is responsible for creating an agenda for reducing homelessness, managing spending of funding supplied to local advocacy groups, and monitoring progress toward local and state goals. Those goals are in alignment with the mandate of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which strives to make homelessness “rare, brief, and nonrecurring.”

One focus of the group is to increase the availability of affordable and transitional housing.

There is no designated homeless shelter or official transitional housing in Grand County. Service organizations sometimes find temporary shelter for people in need at local hotels or campgrounds, but sometimes must refer people to the closest shelters: in Colorado, Salt Lake City, and St. George.

Local advocates have also initiated new projects like the [Safe Outdoor Living shed](http://www.safeoutdoorliving.com), through which people can get camping supplies. The LHC is also making an effort to collect data on issues that intersect with homelessness, such as mental health, substance abuse, or domestic violence. A network of local service groups can share case information and connect people with
the most appropriate service or resource. The MVMC submits data on homelessness to the state through a database called the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

Melnicoff spoke at the Jan. 18 meeting as a citizen to highlight the need for a shelter or warming center in Grand County.

“Fourteen years ago when I started working with the homeless population... something that struck me deeply was meeting a woman named Laurie, who was dead the next week from exposure,” Melnicoff told the commission. “I vowed up to the sky that I would not let anyone die if I could do anything to help it. Unfortunately we’ve had a couple of other deaths since then.”

Melnicoff recounted how in 2008, the local food bank relocated out of a county building and homelessness advocates asked to use it as a shelter. Instead, the building was used as crew quarters for emergency medical services staff. Now those staff have moved to a new EMS building, and Melnicoff again asked the county if the building could be used for a shelter, but county officials told her the building needs to be condemned.

Melnicoff lamented the lack of interest in offering temporary shelter options.

“I just wonder how many deaths are okay for you guys to assume a responsibility for,” she said. “I don’t want to see someone else die. I hope we can at least discuss possibilities and potential.”

Medina also emphasized that the community needs to work together to combat homelessness. “This isn’t just for one nonprofit... to take on,” she said. “We need to work together to address homelessness. It’s not going away.”